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## **HEALTH-CONGO: AIDS The Number One Cause Of Death In The Army**

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BRAZZAVILLE, Jan 10 (IPS) - AIDS is the number one cause of death in the Congolese Armed Forces. Fourteen percent of servicemen are HIV-positive, armed forces health officials have revealed.

According to the director of the First Military Zone's health service, Colonel Prosper Kinzonzi, the disease wiped out the equivalent of three companies of men between 1989 and 1993.

AIDS accounted for more than 60 percent of army deaths during the period 1989-1993, Kinzonzi says.

According to him, the government's armed forces are composed of an at-risk population: they are young, mobile, and sexually active. The statistics show that HIV-positive recruits are admitted with each new class of recruits.

In 1993, 82 of 578 candidates recruited into the airborne division were found to be HIV-positive. In 1995, 37 HIV-positive individuals were discovered among 437 recruits. Nine cases of AIDS were reported out of the 271 young soldiers recruited by the National Gendarmerie in 1999.

Kinsonzi attributes the increase in the number of AIDS cases in the military to prostitution and the sexual violence committed by soldiers while participating in conflicts which have devastated the central African country.

According to the International Rescue Committee (IRC), a U.S. agency, which specialises in assisting rape victims, some 3,000 cases of rape were recorded in the capital Brazzaville since the beginning of the conflict between government troops and militiamen in December 1998.

The Congolese Army is about 20,000-men strong. Many officers were members of armed groups in the 1997 June to October civil war between the militias of President Denis Sassou Nguesso and his predecessor, Pascal Lissouba.

These Congolese officers, as well as militiamen of the deposed president, Lissouba, were accused by the Congolese Human Rights Observer Mission (OCDH) and the International Federal for Human Rights (FIDH) of extorting money from civilians.

According to the OCDH, these extortion are frequently carried out by armed men in uniform or in plainclothes.

"In most instances, new recruits coming from the former Cobras, the militia close to President Nguesso, lack professional training. Their only familiarity with professional military or police practices is how to shoot a gun", the OCDH says.

In an attempt to restore order among the rank-and-file, the army chief of staff, General Jacques-Yvon Ndoulou, visited three squads in the capital last week in order to tighten up discipline.

"Military tribunals will be set up soon to judge and, if necessary, execute servicemen found guilty of reprehensible acts", Ndoulou says.

In the same vein, the National Transition Council, the provisional parliament, adopted two bills regarding the creation of military tribunals in Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire, the commercial capital of the Congo, to punish dishonorable servicemen.

These new judicial bodies will deal solely with military problems. However, they will also be authorised to pass judgement on civilians who collaborate with servicemen.

To help improve serviceman's respect for human rights, the Congolese Association for the United Nations has begun a training campaign for army units.

Military authorities are also considering to restructure the armed forces to make them more democratic and totally apolitical. A commission of officers is being set up to develop new organisational models.(END/IPS/lm/nrn/sz/mn/00)